

# Monks with Class

*By Skip Williams*



To most people, the monk is simply a fighting character whose whole body serves as a weapon. But a well-played monk also adds a touch of the exotic and the mysterious to a campaign. In addition, the monk is among the most versatile characters in the game and can fill a variety of roles in an adventuring party.

## The Pros and Cons of a Monk

The monk's wide range of abilities makes her an effective combatant against all sorts of foes.

### Monk Assets

When you choose a monk, you get effective fighting ability plus an array of useful talents -- some of which are quite handy for moving around and avoiding damage. Below are several assets you have going for you when you play a monk.

- **Unarmed Strike:** A monk's hands and feet (and the rest of her body, when necessary) are effective weapons when she begins play, and they just keep getting better as she progresses. At higher levels, her unarmed strikes can overcome a foe's damage reduction and even slay her opponents outright. In addition, the monk's flurry of blows ability allows extra unarmed attacks, which can be very handy when she faces large numbers of fairly weak foes.
- **Fairly Good Attack Bonus:** A monk's base attack bonus -- +3 per four levels -- is second only to that of the most martial classes, such as the fighter. Though it's not the best in the game, it does give the monk a decent chance for success when attacking.
- **Bonus Feats:** As she attains higher levels, the monk can choose from a small number of bonus feats that expand her options in combat.
- **Good Fortitude, Reflex, and Will Saves:** A monk uses the best save progression in the game for all saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural mental and physical resilience helps her resist most effects that attack her body or her mind.
- **Defensive Abilities:** As she attains higher levels, the monk gains the ability to evade damage from area attacks, an extra saving throw bonus against enchantment spells, and immunity to disease, poison, and even the ravages of old age.
- **Fast Movement:** When a monk reaches 3rd level, she gains increased speed whenever she isn't wearing armor or carrying a medium or heavy load. At higher levels, she takes her place among the fastest land creatures in the game. At 12th level, she can literally step out of the real world and reappear a short distance away.
- **Good Skill Selection:** The monk has a substantial list of class skills that can improve her perception, self-sufficiency, and agility.

- **Ki Strike Ability:** The monk's innate ability to bypass certain types of Damage Reduction (first magic, then lawful, then adamantine) means she often has a head start on getting through the Damage Reduction of certain monsters. While it isn't extremely flexible, since it only works on unarmed attacks and only becomes available as the monk goes up in levels, it's nevertheless an edge monks have over other classes.
- **Improved Grapple as a Bonus Feat Choice:** Even though grappling is not the best option all the time in combat, a monk who selects Improved Grapple has an edge over other PCs. A monk's natural weapons can be used to cause real damage in a grapple, whereas other grappling PCs must either cause nonlethal damage or use weapons -- which almost always means suffering a penalty to attack while in a grapple.

## Monk Weaknesses

The monk's many advantages come at a price. Here are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a monk character.

- **Mediocre Armor Class:** A monk has no proficiency with armor or shields, but she gains a level-based Armor Class bonus and can use her Wisdom bonus (if any) to improve Armor Class. These improvements allow her a reasonable Armor Class, but not a great one. As a result, she tends to be more vulnerable to damage in battle than other martial characters.
- **Mediocre Hit Points:** The monk's 8-sided Hit Dice give her a respectable number of hit points. As a fighting character, however, she has few hit points to spare -- especially given her fairly weak Armor Class.
- **Poor Weapon Selection:** A monk's unarmed strikes don't always do the job in combat, but she has few other options. She is proficient with only a handful of weapons, and none of them are terribly effective.
- **Fewer Magic Item and "Buff Up" Spell Choices:** Many of the most combat-effective magic items and spells in the game are geared toward weapon or equipment users. Monks have a more difficult time picking up random items and using them effectively. The monk usually has to focus on more general, and more expensive, magic items and spells to increase her abilities in combat.

## Playing a Classy Monk

Great monks usually use the following techniques. So if you're playing one of these characters, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

### Be Adaptable

Despite your lawful nature, you're very flexible, so you can fill many different roles in a party. You can fight well enough to stand in the front line and carry the battle to the enemy, and your speed makes you a natural for rescuing allies who have gotten into trouble. You can cover a lot of ground in a hurry, and you have access to stealth and perception skills that allow you to excel as a scout, a rear guard, or a lookout. You can also choose interaction skills that let you serve as party spokesperson, and you can rely on your speed and excellent saving throws to get you out of trouble should negotiations go awry. Your ability to switch roles as needed makes you an invaluable addition to any party.

### Be Prudent

As a monk, you know that getting carried away with your many abilities is a great way to get killed. You're a capable fighter, but you lack the stamina to serve for long as your party's main combat force. Your superior speed can prove handy, but you can literally outrun your allies and find yourself facing death long before your friends can catch up and rescue you. And the fact that you lack a rogue's talent for locating and disarming traps limits your ability to scout ahead in a dungeon.

## Flurry with Care

Your flurry of blows ability is flashy and fun, but the extra attacks it provides come at the expense of accuracy. In addition, since you need a full attack action to use a flurry, you can't do it on the move, and your speed is among your chief assets. So save your flurries for opponents you know you can hit. Otherwise, try to keep moving in a fight.

## Don't Hoard Your Resources

At higher levels, you have more Stunning Fist attempts per day than you will probably ever use. Look for feat choices that allow you to use your Stunning Fist attempts in alternative ways. If you don't have (or don't want) such feats, don't hesitate to use your Stunning Fist regularly in combat. Even against monsters with high Fortitude saves (like giants or dragons), a natural "1" is an automatic failure -- and keeping a high-level creature from doing anything during its round can turn a tough battle into a win very quickly.

## Stay Mobile

Your speed is a great asset, so use it whenever your absence won't leave your party in the lurch -- or you out on a limb. Avoid going toe-to-toe with formidable opponents when you can; instead, use your speed to seek out dangerous but vulnerable foes, such as enemy spellcasters. A few ranks in the Tumble skill can enable you to move right through the enemy's front line and wreak havoc from the rear. When facing physically dangerous foes, use your speed to pin them down quickly, then hold your position until a slower, better-armored ally can take over. If you have some maneuvering space, consider moving in, attacking, and then breaking off the fight temporarily. The Tumble skill or the Spring Attack feat is useful for this kind of tactic.

## Keep Help Close at Hand

Try to avoid situations that might force you to face danger alone. You might want to serve as the party's scout, but don't range so far ahead that your friends can't mount a rescue in a round or two. In a battle, consider which other characters can best serve as your allies and stick close to them.

**The Party's Main Warrior:** You and the character with the best combat ability can help each other a lot. Working together with a fighter lets you flank your foes, which just might give you enough of an edge to try a flurry of blows. Likewise, the fighter is your best hope if you find yourself locked in melee with a foe that's too tough for you. On the other hand, your perception skills (such as Spot and Listen) are likely better than any fighter's, and a timely warning from you can prevent disaster from befalling this most important ally.

**The Party's Stealth Person:** If you're not the party's scout, your great speed and fighting prowess make you the obvious person to come to that character's rescue when misfortune strikes (and it often does).

**The Party's Arcane Spellcaster:** This character is weaker and more vulnerable than you in physical combat, so be prepared to come to her aid when trouble arises. If she faces an unexpected threat, you might be the only

character who can get free to deal with the situation.

**The Party's Divine Spellcaster:** Get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric, druid, or paladin. This character's healing spells can stave off death, especially when you've been heavily damaged.

## Some Key Equipment

A monk can literally get along without any equipment at all -- at least some of the time. Nevertheless, the right gear can help immensely. Below are some essential pieces to pack.

- **Armor:** Wearing armor and using a shield are impractical for you at best, since you don't have proficiency with them. Spending a good portion of your cash on protective magic items is often a good idea, so buy some *bracers of armor* as soon as you can afford them. As you attain higher levels and accumulate some wealth, add a *ring of protection* and an *amulet of natural armor*. Several lesser items that stack usually give you better protection, and at a cheaper price, than one big item. And because you can use your Wisdom bonus to improve your Armor Class, consider a *periapt of Wisdom*, which also improves your perception skills and your Will saves. Finally, *gloves of Dexterity* can improve your Armor Class, initiative bonus, and Reflex saves all at once.
- **Backup Melee Weapons:** Your unarmed strikes serve as your primary melee weapons, but they won't prove suitable against all opponents. Since your unarmed strikes deal bludgeoning damage, be sure to carry along a slashing weapon, a piercing weapon, or both. A kama has reasonable damage potential, and it's also a special martial arts weapon that you can use with your flurry of blows ability. A dagger deals both piercing and slashing damage, plus you can throw it. And although a quarterstaff is a bludgeoning weapon, you can use it with a flurry of blows -- plus it can function as either as a two-handed weapon or a double weapon, giving you plenty of combat options.
- **Ranged Weapon:** Keeping your foes at a distance during combat markedly increases your survival chances. Shurikens are flashy thrown weapons that also work with your flurry of blows ability, so they are a good choice. But since their range is very short, it pays to have a weapon on hand that can send a projectile a little farther. If you have a Strength bonus, consider a sling, which has a better range than a thrown weapon and allows you to apply your Strength bonus to damage. But you can't beat a heavy crossbow for combining range with decent damage potential. A heavy crossbow takes awhile to reload, however, so you might prefer a light crossbow for its faster rate of fire.

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## About the Author

**Skip Williams** keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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